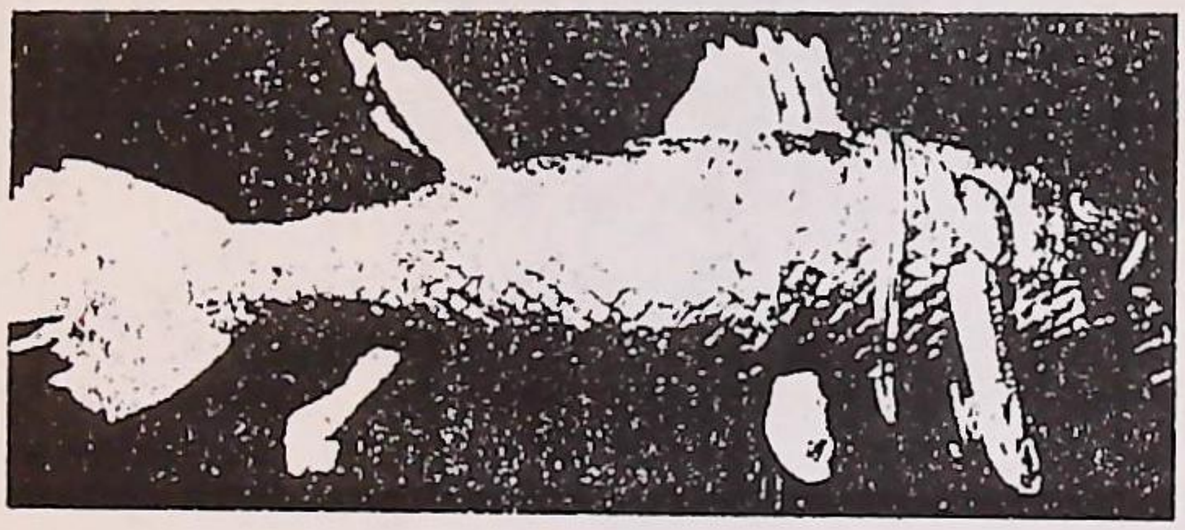
Ichthos, n° 8, March 1985

THE SILVER COELACANTH

The epic discovery of the first and second coelacanths is well-known to our readers. Since 1952 over 110 other live coelacanths have been found and are lodged in museums around the world. Although living coelacanths are only known from the east and south-east coasts of Africa, fossil forms are known from rock strata in England, Scotland, continental Europe and North America.

The coelacanth story had an interesting twist, however, 20 years ago when a chemist, Dr Ladislao Reti, obtained a beautiful objet d'art from a priest in a village church near Bilbao in northern Spain. The silver ornament, about 10 cm long, bears a striking resemblance to a coelacanth, but was made by a silversmith about 100 years before the first living coelacanth was discovered.



The ornament is so accurate in its rendition of the fins, fin lobes, scales and soft anatomy of a coelacanth that it is unlikely that it was copied from a fossil. The other possibility is that it was copied from a living fish.

Dr Donald de Sylva, writing in 'Sea Frontiers' in 1966, suggests an intriguing possibility - that living coelacanths might occur elsewhere, for instance, in steep rocky habitats in the Mediterranean Sea or eastern Atlantic Ocean, especially around the Canary Islands and Azores. Another possibility is that early Portuguese or Spanish sailors may have brought a coelacanth specimen back from the Comores Islands during their early travels up the east African coast.

The mystery of the silver coelacanth may never be solved. Maybe, one day, that historic day in 1938 will be relived as some angler or commercial fisherman catches a living coelacanth off West Africa or in the Mediterranean Sea.

Dear Sir/Madam,

NOTICE REGARDING DEPARTMENTAL PUBLICATIONS ON WETLANDS AND CAPE FISH

This Department is at present conducting a campaign to coincide with international programmes for the conservation of wetlands.

The wetland system of the Cape includes estuaries, lakes, vleis and salt pans. Wetlands have a unique beauty and are ecologically and economically of great importance. They are complex and sensitive systems and consequently vulnerable to human disturbance.

The information pieces which are being produced and distributed by the Department contain many interesting details concerning wetlands.

The following publications are available on request:

A full-colour 1985 wetlands calendar comprising 6 pages is for sale at R2,00 plus 20c G S T.

Free information pieces include:

* Cape Conservation Series No 5 in which the 38 freshwater fish species indigenous to the Cape are fully illustrated. Factors which threaten them, as well as their conservation, are described.

* a full-colour poster of the threats facing our indigenous fish.

* "South African estuaries and their importance to fishes" - an illustrated guide compiled by Dr J H Wallace and co-workers.

* A full-colour poster of wetlands.

You are cordially requested to help as far as possible with the conservation of these important ecosystems and their unique forms of wildlife.

Yours sincerely,

C V van der Merwe
Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation, Private Bag X9086, Cape Town 8000

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(Loi n° 57298 du 11.3.57, art. 41.2°)

Ichthos, n = 23, July 1989

Is there a Madagascar coelacanth?

AT a recent conference on the coelacanth which I attended in San Francisco, I heard informally from a Japanese researcher that they have a recent record of a coelacanth from the north-east shore of Madagascar. Several coelacanth researchers have suggested that coelacanths could live off the steep, rocky eastern shores of this large island, but there were no firm records. It is widely thought that the coelacanth is highly vulnerable to extinction if it only occurs off the Comoros islands. Although the Madagascan coelacanth record still has to be confirmed, the hint that they may occur there is encouraging.

Interestingly, Madagascar issued a postage stamp in 1982 depicting the coelacanth, but we are not certain whether the stamp is meant to portray a local fish or a fish from the adjacent Comoros islands.

This will gill you

WHAT'S life like under the sea? Is it a dogfish-eat-dogfish world? Is everybody united for a common porpoise, or do they all split up into special groupers? One tragic story indicates it's pretty bad down there.

There was once a brilliant sturgeon on the staff of the community health fishility. He was in fact one of its flounders. Wiser than Salmon, a fin fellow who would never shrimp from his responsibilities, he was successful and happy; he always whistled a happy tuna.

One day, one of his patients, a mere whipper snapper, told the sturgeon that his medical theories were full of abalone, and started trouting around telling everybody that the sturgeon's treatments had made him more eel than he had been, and then actually conched him with a malpractice suit!

Well, the sturgeon was in a real pickerel. The board demanded his oyster, and chased him off the staff. But the case smelt to high heaven, so the judge denied the plaintiff's clam. The board tried to hire the sturgeon back, but by then he had hit the bottlenose pretty hard, and the end of our shad tail is that the sturgeon ended up on Squid Roe. Buoy! Isn't that a fine kettle of you-know-what?

James Thom in Nuggets
(sent to us by Mrs M McComb)

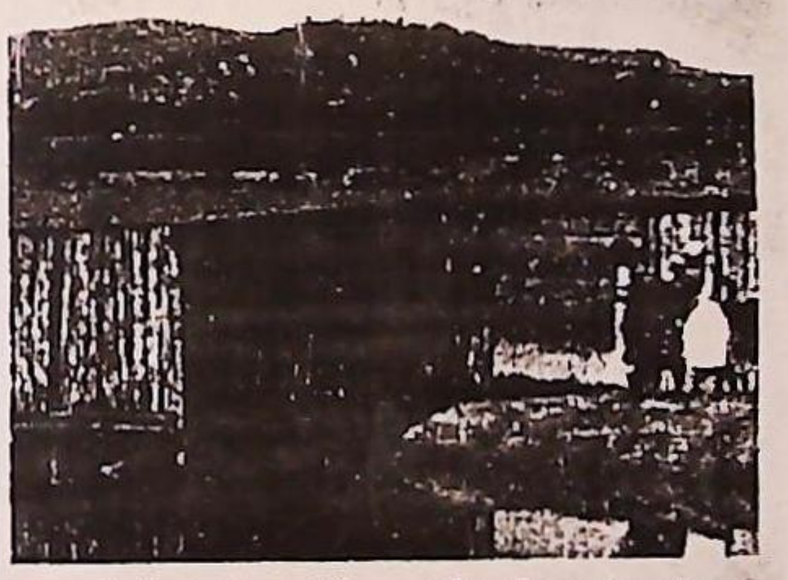
Chicken and fish - the China connection

IN Gazankulu, home of the Tsonga, an unusual farming project combining chicken and fish farming is being developed. This project combines the traditional eating of the local "Mocambique tilapia" and the type of farming used by the Chinese more than 5 000 years ago, when such systems with a wide variety of fish and domestic animals were used in integrated farms.

The Gazankulu Fisheries Division has built four fish farms over the past four years, and the demonstration farm run by Mr William Hughes-Games and his wife Sarah serves as an example for the local tribal authorities who in turn are in charge of other farms. These tribal authority fish farms receive technical advice from the demonstration farm and financial assistance from the Central Government. The aim of the farm is to provide rural communities with enough healthy, cheap food to counter malnutrition. Each farm contains four ponds with a total are a of one hectare. A large chicken run is built on the bank of each pond, overhanging the water, and comprises four cages each containing 200 chickens. Day-old chicks are placed in the cages which have a layer of grass covering the slatted floor. While the fowls grow over a period of eight weeks, their manure mixes with the grass and is trampled through the floor, flowing steadily into the water. Millions of water creatures are provided with food from this mixture, and they in turn provide the only food necessary for the fish in the pond.

Each week the shallow quarter of the pond is seined and netted and the fish are sold to local inhabitants at a reasonable price. After eight weeks the chickens are also sold and the proceeds are used to buy chicken feed again. This continuous cycle can lead eventually to a steady profit as the annual yield per pond and chicken run is 5 tons of fish and 20 000 chickens.

Provision is also made around the



ponds for vegetable production, thus integrating aquaculture and agriculture. The concept has been applied before in several other countries e.g. many years ago in China they farmed mulberry trees, silkworms and fish. The silkworm-droppings fell into the water and the cycle continued in much the same way as the one described above. If the people in the rural areas of southern Africa and Africa in general could learn to farm in this way, the word "famine" might disappear from the continent.

With acknowledgements to "Southern Africa today"(September, 1988) and Deon van Loggerenberg.